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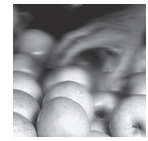

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Consuming pedagogies: Controlling images of women as consumers in popular culture

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Abstract

We seek to understand how, by engaging in various sites of consumption, we learn particular gendered, raced and classed consumer subjectivities that often uphold patriarchal consumer capitalism. Drawing from academic literature on the history of consumption, we examine the historical construction of shopping and consumption as 'feminine' domains and explore how current discourses about females and consumerism continue to construct women as particular kinds of consumers who possess and enact particular behaviors, dispositions and values. We also conduct a cultural studies analysis of popular culture discourses about female consumers. We argue that dominant discourses about women as consumers operate as master narratives, creating controlling images and perpetuating a politics of disgust that demeans and oppresses women. We specifically focus on how particular groups of women are differentially subjected to more or less negative characterizations with/in these discourses. We examined historical texts, including print advertisements, television commercials and popular literature, that memorably portrayed the roles of women as consumers. Contemporary print advertisements, television commercials, internet sites and music lyrics from popular artists provided sources for further analysis of the proliferation of these stereotypes. Through critical analysis and description of these popular culture representations, we hope to reveal and challenge – to disarticulate and rearticulate – the deficit, racist, classist and sexist perspectives in these majoritarian stories, in order to challenge dominant discourses of White, male and middle-class privilege.

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Media are ubiquitous in our daily lives and are increasingly dominated by a small number of commercial superpowers – transnational corporations seeking to advance a global market and promote commercial messages that support the consumer economy (Molnar, 2005; Norris, 2011). As a result, a growing number of critical educators (Hoechsmann, 2007; Kahn, 2010; Kenway and Bullen, 2001; Molnar, 2005; Steinberg, 2010) have sought to understand consumption's pedagogy – how we are taught to be consumers, to operate within consumer capitalism, and to accept consumerism as natural (Stearns et al., 2011). In this article we are especially interested in exploring consumption's *gendered* lessons, and seek to understand how, by engaging in various sites of consumption, we learn particular gendered, raced and classed consumer subjectivities that often uphold patriarchal consumer capitalism (Kenway and Bullen, 2010; Scanlon, 2000; Steinberg, 2010; Weems, 2000). Gender is significant to the perpetuation of consumer capitalism because of the culturally and socially constructed gender roles we play as women and as men and in the context of consumer culture (Scanlon, 2000: 1). As Andrews and Talbot (2000) note, in westernized capitalist societies, consumption is an inescapable part of being a woman and a context in which female roles are performed, challenged and legitimized. The inescapability of consumption is perpetuated by pervasive forms of commercial media such as television, print ads, popular music and social media, which are pedagogical sites that offer important insights into the ways that race, class and gender operate to define *women as shoppers* in popular cultural contexts.

Drawing from academic literature on the history of consumption, we examine here the historical construction of shopping and consumption as feminine domains (Slater, 1997: 82; see also Bocock, 1993; Bowlby, 2001; Cohen, 2003; Scanlon, 2000) and explore how current discourses about females and consumerism continue to construct women as particular kinds of consumers who possess and enact particular behaviors, dispositions and values. We also conduct a cultural studies analysis of popular culture discourses about female consumers and argue that dominant discourses about women as consumers operate as master narratives (Mishler, 1995), or what Solórzano and Yosso (2002) call majoritarian stories, creating 'controlling images' (Collins, 2000) and perpetuating a 'politics of disgust' (Hancock, 2004) that demeans and oppresses women. According to Mishler (1995), such master narratives convey the values of prevailing social and political groups and 'their unexamined taken-for-granted assumptions about how the world is and ought to be conceal patterns of domination and submission. Like all narratives, these are selective representations, excluding experiences and views of some sectors of society while including and privileging others' (1995: 114). In this article we

focus on the ways in which particular groups of women are differentially subjected to more or less negative characterizations with/in these discourses.

Theoretical and methodological framings

In order to understand the ways in which dominant discourses of women as shoppers inform our identities, we interrogate here the images and ideas that frame popular perceptions of female consumers. We take up the examination of discourses of women as shoppers because, as Stuart Hall argues, 'how we ''see'' ourselves and our social relations *matters*, because it enters into and informs our actions and practices' (2000: 272). As Andrews (2002) claims, the power of master narratives and dominant discourses lies in the ways in which we internalize them. As we internalize these master narratives, they shape how we view the world and enact our lives, and are thus reproduced. Narratives embody certain ideologies and ways of acting in the world, shape how groups in society are perceived, and influence social policy, which has both ideological and material consequences (Gring-Pemble, 2003; Sandlin and Clark, 2009). These dominant discourses construct a 'particular kind of social world, with specified heroes and villains, deserving and undeserving people, and a set of public policies that are rationalized by the construction of social problems for which they become solutions' (Bennett and Edelman, 1985: 159). As we show, dominant discourses of women as consumers consistently articulate meaning and shape or define reality (DeLuca, 1999; Hall, 2000; Laclau and Mouffe, 1985), as they bring together and seek to fix or reify negative concepts and practices such as wastefulness, which in turn often casts women in the role of villains. When individuals engage with/in such articulations, they come to embrace certain knowledges and ways of being that 'allow them to ''utter'' ideological truths as if they were their authentic authors' (Hall, 2000: 272).

Dominant discourses of society are often perpetuated – as well as negotiated, resisted or expanded (Hall, 2000) – through popular culture representations (Macedo and Steinberg, 2007). Stuart Hall (2000) explains that these discourses are created in part through various forms of media and popular culture that construct the contexts through which we recognize and interpret social practices. Popular culture is a primary arena of education and learning and is increasingly being considered an important area of research by critical educators (Buckingham, 2003; Kincheloe, 2002; Wright and Sandlin, 2009). Thus, it is important to examine not only how women as consumers have been discussed in academic literature, but also how they have been constructed in popular culture, which includes movies, television, popular music, advertising and also newer digital technologies such as websites and blogs. Such an examination draws on the concept of bricolage (Kincheloe, 2008), which aptly describes methodology in cultural studies (Alasuutari, 1995). In this study we were concerned with reading, via critical textual analysis (McKee, 2003), the ways in which women are constructed as consumers in popular media. First, we traced the historical foundations of these popular constructions by examining the feminization of consumption in modernity.

Following this historical analysis, we examined historical texts, including print advertisements, television commercials, and popular literature that memorably portrayed the roles of women as consumers and contemporary print advertisements as sources for further analysis of the proliferation of these constructions. We viewed these data as cultural texts and, drawing upon McKee's (2003) approach to interpretive cultural textual analysis, we *read*, or sought to understand, how these texts articulate particular meanings with/through constructions of women as consumers. Through critical analysis and description of these representations, we hope to reveal and challenge – to disarticulate and rearticulate (Hall, 2000), or, to show how linkages between elements are constructed and therefore not natural or necessary (DeLuca, 1999) – the deficit, racist, classist, and sexist perspectives in these majoritarian stories, in order to challenge dominant discourses of White, male and middle-class privilege (Solórzano and Yosso, 2002: 37).

The role of the woman as consumer is central to the examination of these discourses. Many of the controlling images that pervade popular characterizations of women can be traced to the rise of the modern advertising industry. Historically, the various schools of interpretation for advertising and consumer history have had differing views on the role of the consumer in constructing and reifying consumer identities. Ewen (1988) argues that consumers are victimized by the masking of underlying meaning, presenting consumerism as a negative force characterized by conspiracy. Other analyses of advertising and consumerism (Durning, 1992; Jacobson and Mazur, 1995) emphasize the subsequent environmental and aesthetic destruction, while some (Lears, 1994; Twitchell, 1996) acknowledge the consumer as an active participant in the triumph of consumerism. Here, we recognize that while advertising and the popular media that perpetuate a consumer culture present depictions that impact the ways we see ourselves as shoppers, women – including the researchers – actively and often knowingly participate in the ongoing construction of consumer identities through their buying behaviors.

The feminization of consumption

The foundations of contemporary portrayals of women as consumers can be traced to the historical roots of the American consumer economy. Shopping has long been assigned to the female domain, and thus consumer culture has historically been associated with feminization (Slater, 1997: 82; see also Bocock, 1993; Bowlby, 2001; Scanlon, 2000). Since the initial emergence of a consumer economy, American popular and political media have perpetuated gendered stereotypes by creating a dichotomy that positions women as shoppers and men as producers. The feminization of consumption draws from the capitalistic ideology of the sexual division of labor (Fraser, 1989; Slater, 1997). Women became associated with the home and were seen to be in charge of the domestic sphere (Lubar, 1998). Beginning in the mid-19th century, this dichotomy was further emphasized by a burgeoning advertising industry, both in the USA and later in Europe, that consistently and aggressively urged women to 'go out and buy' (Bocock, 1993: 95).

With the onset of mass production in the late 19th century came the rise of the modern advertising industry, which was controlled by White, elite men, whose narrow perspectives often failed to capture the diversity of society (Parkin, 2006). Subsequent analysis from historians and cultural critics have recognized how the advertising industry excluded African Americans and limited the role of women within advertising agencies, which further forwarded the particular classed perspective of the advertising executives (Parkin, 2006). However, the new, nationally advertised brand-name products that became accessible and affordable at the turn of the century became symbols of universal feelings of comfort, ease, power and speed (Cross, 2000).

One of the most effective vehicles for advertising in the late 19th century was the modern women's magazine. These magazines, which included *The Ladies Home Journal*, *Good Housekeeping* and *House Beautiful*, relied on the newly developing order of middle-class readers poised to become the first great generation of consumers of advertised commercial goods. While these periodicals differed somewhat in content, they were all designed to appeal to middle- and upper-class women who shared similar interests of home and motherhood. Thus, the precedent for presenting White, economically and socially privileged women as typical consumers was set in the infancy of the modern advertising industry.

As American women entered the labor force in the First World War and soon gained unprecedented freedom with the passage of the 19th amendment (which gave them the right to vote), popular portrayals expanded to include their new roles, although this shift would be short-lived. Following the Great Depression, the Second World War brought a resurgence of autonomy and an increased emphasis on women as producers. Although the opportunity for employment gave women increased control over their spending habits, the vast absence of American men during this period only served to reinforce the role of women as the primary consumers. This enduring feminization of consumption would serve advertisers well when they needed to sell the message that it was time for women to relinquish their jobs and return to their domestic sphere. As *Good Housekeeping* writer Cecil Brown (1943, in Weatherford, 2010) noted long before the war had ended, advertisers would have to embark on a 'campaign to glorify the American homemaker. We will have to sell them on the idea of the home, just as we sold them on the idea of going into war work' (2010: 7). The post-war period thus in many ways reversed the kinds of economic, workplace and civic authority women had achieved during the war (Cohen, 2003). After the Second World War, US policies such as the GI Bill, which insured men disproportionate economic access, upheld traditional gender roles of men as operating in the public sphere of paid work and women as taking care of the private sphere of the home through unpaid homemaking (Cohen, 2003).

Illustrating the enduring tension between private and public spheres are magazine advertisements published between 1960 and 1979, which rarely depicted women in employment outside the home and typically portrayed them engaging in traditional activities such as cooking, cleaning or childcare (Jacobson and Mazur, 1995). This trend in print advertisements continued throughout the

1980s, with domestic-centered magazines such as *Better Homes and Gardens* and *Family Circle* holding fast as the top selling women's magazines long after women were increasingly infiltrating the corporate scene (Endres and Lueck, 1995). These periodicals featured prominently advertisements for perishable goods, home furnishings and beauty products, reinforcing the idea that, in spite of their increasing visibility in the formerly male-dominated workplace, women remained the primary caretakers and consumers for the domestic sphere.

In the late 20th century an even more powerful medium for commercial messages emerged in the form of television. Even before the mainstream media was controlled almost entirely by a handful of corporations (McAllister and Proffitt, 2009), the primary function of television entertainment was to provide audiences for advertisers. As television quickly grew into an integral part of American culture, it became 'the social and intellectual glue that holds us together, our ''core curriculum,'' our duomo' (Twitchell, 1996: 92). In spite of the vast forms of media now available to American consumers, television remains a vital part of that curriculum, the message of which has not changed significantly in regards to gendered portrayals of consumption.

Stereotypes of female shoppers

The feminization of consumption positioned women as the primary caretakers and consumers for the domestic sphere and produced stereotypes of female shoppers that continue to influence popular portrayals of women as consumers. While women, particularly White middle-class women, were increasingly associated with shopping during the 20th century, two main stereotypes emerged that positioned women as *particular types* of shoppers. The more covertly hegemonic association of consumption with the feminine draws upon notions of caretaking, as women have been crafted as what Cohen (2003) calls purchaser consumers, acting out their duties to family and country through shopping – what Slater (1997) refers to as good domestic management. During the Second World War, male citizens were considered producers, serving their country by working in the military or the defense industry (Cohen, 2003). Women, however, were 'defined in consumerist ways, as keepers of the homefront fires through their own disciplined patriotic market behavior' (Cohen, 2003: 75). This perspective has negatively affected both women and shopping, as it perpetuates patriarchal stereotypes of women as emotional rather than rational (Jubas, 2008).

There has also been a competing, more overtly negative discourse that positions women as irrational, capricious dupes of advertising and of the ideologies of consumerism, and even mentally ill (Bowlby, 2001). Both consumer culture and consumption's association with women were well established in many western countries by the mid-19th century. Women were constructed in/through moralistic and misogynistic popular discourse at this time as out-of-control, mentally ill and suffering from so-called shopping diseases. Popular discourses positioned women this way, posits Slater (1997), because of fears that women – through moving out of

the *private* spaces of home into the *public* spaces of department stores – might be eluding patriarchy's gaze and grip. Shopping spaces were seen as unregulated, and were positioned as stirring up within women fantasy, desire and 'insatiable need' (1997: 76). Fears about these threats to patriarchy, Slater (1997) suggests, manifested in popular discourses constructing the supposed hysterical female shopper. In keeping with these discourses of fear and panic, advertisers grew increasingly committed to the assumption that women were driven by their emotions and began to construct and address them as capricious yet passive conformists (Marchand, 1986). Such constructions of women as weak and emotional consumers have remained consistent throughout history, and the popular conception of consumer as dupe was and still is typically associated with women (Slater, 1997). Despite women's more complicated consumer practices that reveal how they do not simply accept but also negotiate and reappropriate consumerist ideologies (Scanlon, 2000), women have been positioned since the early 20th century in and through popular culture as 'whimsical and inconstant, flighty, [and] narcissistic' (Slater, 1997: 57).

A survey of memorable television commercials provides us with numerous examples of how women as consumers have been constructed in public and popular culture as emotional and duped. *New York Magazine* recently produced a list of the twenty most memorable advertisements since 1968, as ranked by New York ad executives (*New York Magazine*, 2008). Among this list are several campaigns that feature men in serious business or work-related situations, but none that portray women in such roles. In one such ad, a Volkswagen commercial from 1969, a deceased businessman is heard narrating his will, in which he leaves '$100 and a calendar' to his wife, Rose, who 'spent money like there was no tomorrow'. Another ad featuring both women and men, a 1969 American Motors commercial, highlights a number of bad drivers, of which the women are inarguably the worst. The bad male drivers are depicted as cautious and uncertain, while the women are panicked, reckless and dumb. Only two of the top 20 advertisements feature women as the central characters. One is the unforgettable 'Where's the Beef' campaign initiated by fast food chain Wendy's in the 1980s, which featured a trio of female octogenarians in hapless, rash pursuit of a satisfactory hamburger patty. The women were portrayed as lacking a host of social and technical skills, such as operating a telephone, obtaining assistance and driving a car. The other example is equally telling; in this ad, the actress Brooke Shields, in a provocative, open-legged pose, tells us that nothing comes between her and her Calvin Klein jeans. Here, we see the irrational, narcissistic stereotype that would eventually lead women to proudly proclaim obsessive shopping as an acceptable – even desirable – pastime.

This construction of the weak, ill, out-of-control female figure stands in sharp contrast to the rational, autonomous, calculating economic man that emerged in the early 1900s in neoclassical economics. Recent popular television campaigns reveal that the juxtaposition of the irrational, materialistic, narcissistic woman with the cautious, serious man continues to be a common marketing technique. A 2007 US Milk Council ad showed men frantically buying shopping carts full of milk, citing a recent study that linked the reduction of pre-menstrual stress (PMS)

symptoms with calcium intake, and a recent razor commercial uses computer-generated animation to blatantly associate women (and we must assume, their pubic hair) with unruly bushes that need managing with a good product. In addition to advertising, the stereotype of the neurotic female consumer can also be seen in other popular entertainment media, including commercial women's fiction. For instance, this image is dominant in Sophie Kinsella's (2001) *Confessions of a Shopaholic*, which was recently made into a Hollywood movie that earned over one hundred million dollars at box offices worldwide (Box Office Mojo, 2009). Other contemporary writers of commercial fiction for women, including Lauren Weisberger (*The Devil Wears Prada*) and Candace Bushnell (*Sex and the City*), have achieved similar booklist and box office success through promoting such neurotic, shopping-obsessed characters.

In spite of such evidence, some would suggest that constructions of women as impulsive, out-of-control shoppers have largely disappeared from academic discourse, as academic discourse has more recently highlighted more active, agentic roles for women as consumers. Bowlby, for instance, posits that, beginning in the 1980s, in academic discourse the consumer 'lost her sex' (2001: 7) – in other words, that academic discourses came to view the consumer as gender neutral. In this more agentic and ostensibly genderless construction, the consumer has come to be seen not as a passive, duped conformist but an empowered individual negotiating a deal (Bowlby, 2001). This shift in academic conceptualizations of this supposed consumer suggests yet another contradiction, as these discourses, which posit theoretical notions of typical or average consumers who are presumed to be raceless, classless and genderless, at the same time conceal how gender, race and class continue to impact how consumers are constructed. By focusing on this more proactive and self-regulating theoretical consumer, academic consumer discourses can theorize agency and active consumers without necessarily acknowledging how different kinds of consumers are actually positioned very differently in public discourse and popular culture. However, as we demonstrate here, this shift to a more agentic perspective on women as consumers is much less apparent within public and popular culture discourses, where female consumers are still constructed through particular raced stereotypes.

Controlling images of female consumers

The stereotypes that positioned women as particular types of shoppers emerged from an American mass culture focused largely on the buying roles and behaviors of White middle-class women, who were seen as the primary purchasers of consumer goods. Prior to the 1950s and 1960s, a separate consumer market – including separate products, magazines, and advertisements – existed for African Americans and other minorities, while national advertising campaigns and magazines such as *Seventeen* were targeted at White, middle-class consumers (Spring, 2010: 75). Driven by a decisive economic shift, the post-war period presented an opportunity for advertisers to expand their influence and widen the lens of shopper stereotypes

to include minorities. While there is arguably somewhat more integration and equality now in terms of advertising and access to the consumer market, we suggest that these negative stereotypes of women, particularly Black women, as consumers are still prevalent and serve as controlling images (Collins, 2000) that justify racist, sexist, and classist oppression.

While the post-war period brought new economic opportunities for minorities, resulting in an increased presence in the consumer marketplace, access was far from equitable. The resources to secure mortgages, credit, and tax benefits were disproportionately available to men, the middle classes, and Whites. Racial segregation was evident in suburbanization, mass media, advertising and the consumer market (Cohen, 2003; Weems, 2000). In a study of African Americans as consumers, Weems (1999) argues that before the 1960s, African Americans were largely ignored by most American corporations. When they *were* marketed to, advertisements 'consciously or unconsciously, deemed the natural physical attributes of black women 'ugly'' (Weems, 2000: 166) and urged African American women to buy products that would make them look more White – including hair straighteners and skin whiteners. This racist marketing to African Americans followed a century of advertising in both the UK and the USA in which racist representations of African Americans, Native Americans, Asian Americans, Latinos and other minority groups were used to sell products to a largely White audience. McClintock (2000), Steele (2000) and Weems (1999, 2000) provide historical analyses of such racist representations, which included advertisements for brands such as Quaker Oats' Aunt Jemima pancakes, Uncle Remus brand syrup, Cream of Wheat, Uncle Ben's rice, Red Skin peaches, Hamm's beer, and Land O'Lakes butter, among many others.

Beginning in the early 1960s corporations began considering African Americans a potentially profitable consumer market, a shift that happened later for Latinos, Asians, and other minority groups but a long history and legacy of racism and segregation left White advertisers and entrepreneurs unfit to understand life outside of White, middle-class suburbia (Weems, 1999). Weems (1999) also argues that while minorities are now valued as consumers, they are less often valued by Whites as colleagues or neighbors and cannot '*buy* substantive respect and power from American corporations' (p. 323). Thus, consumer culture is still 'a *class culture* that can be broken down across a range of social antagonisms including race and gender, and as such there are a diversity of messages produced for differing consumer clienteles, not just a singular market logic that is universalized equally over all' (Sandlin et al., 2009: 103).

The existence of this class culture is evident in constructions of women as consumers in current popular culture, particularly in the overwhelmingly negative portrayals of Black[1] women, which provide stark evidence of the deeply pervasive racist stereotypes and ideologies that Black women are still subjected to as an entrenched reality of US culture (Omi and Winant, 1986). These stereotypes operate as controlling images, a concept introduced by Patricia Hill Collins, who explains that the portrayal of Black women 'as stereotypical mammies, matriarchs,

welfare recipients, and hot mommas has been essential to the political economy of domination fostering Black women's oppression' (1999: 142). Collins (2000) provides a framework for understanding how Black women are impacted by negative constructions of their consumption behaviors. These negative stereotypical images operate as instruments of power by making 'racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life' (2000: 69). Through our analysis we highlight how these controlling images also appear in the ways in which Black women are constructed as consumers and portrayed through advertising. While we focus specifically on Black women, we recognize that other women of color are subject to equally racist constructions. Tracing these constructions historically and in current popular culture is a project for future research.

Collins's concept of controlling images not only points to the ways in which Black women are subject to racist stereotypes and negative constructions, but also highlights how *poor* Black women are especially targeted by negative discourses. Closely related to the concept of controlling images, then, is Hancock's concept of the politics of disgust – which is a strong, negative 'emotion-laden response to long-standing beliefs about single, poor African American mothers' (2004:9). Controlling images help create and perpetuate this politics of disgust, which negatively affects the objects of such scorn by reinforcing the disenfranchisement of Black women, both middle-class and poor, who are brought into the public realm as repugnant objects of the dominant ideological discourses of others (Hancock, 2004).

Negative stereotypes about Black women can be traced as far back as slavery. After the American abolition, Victorian-era social welfare policies and educational programs championed by elite and middle-class women – both White and Black – targeted poor Black (as well as eastern and southern European immigrant) women, and focused on instilling in them middle-class values such as thrift and discipline, with the accompanying assumption that poor women lacked such values. Hancock (2004) also argues that the welfare queen[2] stereotype has remained persistent, citing President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal policies from the 1930s that sought to regulate the behavior of poor Black women. This stereotype became permanently entrenched in the American collective psyche, largely due to Ronald Reagan's (unfounded) proclamations in the 1980s about welfare queens who allegedly milked the system. This negative portrayal of poor Black women suggests that they are recklessly promiscuous and manipulative, and accuses them of using the welfare system (Abramovitz, 2000); as we show below, this stereotype has come to be applied to Black women regardless of class.

Collins (2000) discusses several controlling images that focus on this pervasive stereotype of rampant materialism. One example are the gold-digging hoochies, who, according to Collins are portrayed in popular discourse as craving material goods and, to satisfy these cravings, as trying to establish 'a long-term relationship with a man with money. These gold-digging hoochies often aim to snare a highly paid athlete and can do so by becoming pregnant' (2000: 82). Another image

described by Collins is that of the Jezebel or whore, who is portrayed as a 'sly, conniving, manipulative, materialistic, sexually aggressive African-American woman whose appetites are subject to very little self-control' (Neubeck and Cazenave, 2001: 35). Collins also illustrates how the welfare queen stereotype is portrayed as a 'highly materialistic, domineering, and manless working-class Black woman' (2000: 80), who 'live[s] lavishly' (Neubeck and Cazenave, 2001: 127). Such controlling images exacerbate a politics of disgust (Hancock, 2004) and reinforce negative stereotypes of Black women as consumers.

Racial stereotypes in popular discourse

Not unlike the entrance of women into the burgeoning consumer economy, which spurred prevalent stereotypes about the shopping behaviors of White, middle-class women, the expansion of economic opportunities for minorities provided another marketing demographic as well as an opportunity for advertisers and popular media to construct new stereotypes to influence buying behavior. The stereotypes of materialism – the controlling images described above – are rampant in current popular discourses about the consumption behavior of Black women. These discourses can easily be traced to advertising and popular media targeting Black women. Beginning in the 1970s, advertisers began purposefully positioning Black women as primarily consumers of beauty and hair-related products, rather than essential goods. An early commercial for Afro-Sheen depicts a young black woman with several different fashionable hairstyles achieved using the product, while a narrator extols its qualities. What is most telling is the conversation that occurs in the final frames when a young man wearing a large plaid hat appears:

> 'And what do you want?,' the woman laughs.
> 'Nothing I can't get with Afro-Sheen', the man smiles.

Here, the implicit message is that the hopes and dreams of African Americans are no more complex than a quality hair product.

In the decades since, advertising media has diversified and become more tailored and pervasive, but, in spite of these changes, mainstream network commercials featuring Black women are infrequent, aside from beauty-oriented commercials featuring light-skinned cultural icons such as Rihanna or Naomi Campbell. Although thousands of commercials spanning several decades are available via YouTube, many hours of searching yielded only a handful of television advertisements that present Black women in mainstream roles. One recent commercial for Taco Bell shows a young Black woman spouting off a sassy and articulate freestyle in response to the two White boys rapping in the drive-through, but this lone example does little to suppress the materialistic stereotype assigned to Black women. One other example, a 2007 ad for Dunkin Donuts, seems to reinforce Collins's (2000) 'diva' controlling image. The spot opens with a Black woman holding a shovel and dressed for outdoor work. Then, supermodel Naomi

Campbell, wearing a pink cocktail dress and heels, is shown in the place of the woman. Campbell flips her hair and sighs provocatively before thrusting the shovel into the ground. When she positions her shoe on the shovel, her heel breaks. Campbell throws a tantrum, screaming and beating a tree with her shovel before throwing her broken shoe, shattering a nearby window. The image then returns to the Black suburbanite, who gently pats the soil around her planted tree as the voiceover promotes tea made for the 'regular, everyday folks.' In this example, the irrational, impulsive woman is juxtaposed with the materialistic diva, seemingly suggesting two alternatives for Black women: be a diva, or be a drag, content with the small pleasures you can afford. With so few mainstream, widely recognized examples from which to construct identities, such negative stereotypes remain largely uncontested.

Further implications of this stereotype are seen in popular magazines for women, both those aimed at the general population and those specifically targeted at Black women (Scanlon, 1995; Weems, 2000). *Family Circle* and *Woman's Day* are both mainstream magazines claiming to address issues important to modern American women. The advertisements within reflect a minimal level of diversity, with models of color appearing less frequently than their Caucasian counterparts, and the featured products include perishables, home furnishings and decor, cosmetics, educational toys and software, collectibles, pet products, cleaning supplies, and over-the-counter and prescription medications. In comparison, *Today's Black Woman* is a magazine claiming to address current issues specifically affecting Black women, including career, health, fitness, money, fashion and beauty. However, the cover picture of First Lady Michelle Obama, pronounced by the magazine as 2009 Woman of Year, belies the contents within, which feature page after page of beauty product advertisements. In fact, in this particular issue, of just 106 pages, traditional advertising comprises over 30 pages. Of those advertisements, only three feature non-cosmetic products, and two of these are advertisements for designer purses. Another 10 pages are dedicated to product placements disguised as trend articles, and more than half of these focus primarily on vanity products.

The stark contrast between the dominant images of the magazine and the actual content is reminiscent of the gender-coding discussed by Jervis (1998). Here gender stereotypes of Black women are reinforced through the role of passive consumer of beauty-oriented products, while the cover image portrays the more transgressive role of Black women's capacity to take on an active role in the public sphere. The contradictions extend into constructions of economic behavior: while Michelle Obama can be understood to represent new opportunities, she might also serve as evidence that other Black women could escape poverty, but have determined their economic circumstances through poor consumption choices. The advertising content within seems to privilege the latter perspective, and lends itself to disconcerting pedagogical implications. Like the White, middle-class women who are ostensibly the target audience for mainstream magazines, Black women have bodies that need medication, families that need feeding, and homes that need cleaning, and yet, advertisements for the products associated with these tasks are

largely absent from magazines designed to address their needs and desires. If advertisers base their marketing decisions on the perceived desires of the targeted audience, the implication is that Black women only care about their hair, skin, style, and little else.

Television and print advertisements are not the only media in which controlling images are found. Stereotypes about women on welfare and their assumed consumptive behavior abound in contemporary Internet discourse. For example, in an online blog entry called 'Regulate the Welfare Abuse,' Kyle Krannebitter perpetuates a myth of lack of self control and gluttony when he states that 'Welfare has become a target for gluttonous mothers and others who have no values or willingness to obtain a job' (2008: para. 1) and argues that women on welfare are 'greedy, lazy Americans that are able to work, but do not choose to' (2008: para. 6).[3] The same stereotypes are also prevalent in more formal, established news outlets. In a critical analysis of the portrayal of Black women in popular culture, Adair recounts one news story in the *Washington Post* that read, 'young black ''welfare pimps'' drive their girls to state offices in limos' (2000: 1) and another that 'exposed' a 'group of female welfare recipients who 'clad in leather and shopping network faux pearls,' spent their days taking taxis from one welfare office to the next, collecting welfare checks under fraudulent names' (2000: 1). Similarly, journalist Kathleen Sylvester wrote in the *Washington Post* that, 'welfare women have refused to sacrifice', and suggested that we need to monitor their behavior and teach them how to manage their household money (quoted in Adair, 2000: 26). And in a *Seattle Times* article, Washington State Congressman Steve Quigly wrote a piece called 'Wean Parents from Dependency', in which he argued that we should put poor women in group homes where 'we could watch the way they spend their money' and 'where they could be watched and where their behavior could be modified with constant supervision' (quoted in Adair, 2000: 17).

Further evidence of these stereotypes can be drawn from hip-hop, which has become increasingly popular with mainstream audiences. In fact, Kitwana (2005) asserts that hip-hop is *the* mainstream pop culture of our time. Unfortunately, as Rose observes, 'The most commercially and financially successful hip-hop – what has dominated mass-media outlets such as television, film, radio, and recording industries for a dozen years or so – has increasingly become a playground for caricatures of black gangstas, pimps, and hoes' (2008: 1). Consider, for example, the extremely popular Kanye West song 'Gold Digger'.[4] In the first verse, West describes an encounter at the beauty salon with a Louis Vuitton-wielding woman, who seems to be interested in his wealth and sexual prowess. The second verse is a cautionary tale about a National Football League (NFL) player who married without a prenuptial agreement. When they divorced, the wife sued him for child support money, which she spent on plastic surgery. The NFL star is left nearly penniless, only to find out later that the child wasn't even his. West's lyrics are reminiscent of what Collins (2000) terms the sexualized bitch. She notes, 'Whether she 'fucks men' for pleasure, drugs, revenge or money, the sexualized bitch constitutes a modern version of the jezebel, repackaged for contemporary mass

media' (2000: 127). Such blatant negative portrayals of Black women undoubtedly reinforce the image of the welfare queen who is supposedly simply looking for her free ride in the form of a man rather than a government subsidy. Similar stereotypes can be seen in more recent hits such as 'You the Boss', the December 2011 single from rapper Rick Ross's fifth album. Again, the lyrics, which claim that all a woman needs is a dominant man who can provide for her, reinforce the idea that the sexualized bitch is dependent on her man for security, and female hip-hop superstar, Nicki Minaj, who sings the refrain, makes it clear that the sexualized bitch is willing to do anything to get what she wants.

These problematic tendencies have plagued hip-hop since it entered the mainstream in the 1990s. As Rose (2008) observes, sexually explicit commercial hip-hop has become so exploitative that it reduces everyone to one of two roles – the dominator or the dominated. Women, of course, are left to endure the submissive role or else risk being labeled 'bitches and hoes' who are 'trying to take a nigga's money' if they should try to take on the dominant persona (2008: 184). As Johnson notes, these cultural issues have been passed down through generations as part of 'a pervasive sexism that has existed even within the upper echelons of leadership for generations' (2007: 1). While sexism is by no means unique to African-American culture, the cross-gender lyrical dialogue that might have emerged as an arena for Black cultural contention is now heard, interpreted and evaluated by dominant groups who may or may not have a vested interest in the conversation. Whereas hip-hop and its progenitor, rap, emerged as a site of cultural negotiation within the African-American community, that negotiation is now happening in the mainstream, where White Americans are redefining their worldviews in the postmodern context of inter-racial, inter-cultural engagement. However, bell hooks asserts that, 'Mainstream white culture is not concerned about black male sexism and misogyny, particularly when it is unleashed against black women and children. It is concerned when young white consumers utilize black popular culture to disrupt bourgeois values' (1994: 1). Still, it must be considered that the Black male sexism and misogyny that continues to dominate hip-hop may be adding fuel to the fire when it comes to White perceptions of Black consumer identity.

(Re)articulating constructions of women as consumers

Since the emergence of the American consumer economy, stereotypes perpetuated by advertising and other popular media have operated to inform public assumptions about women's roles as consumers. The feminization of consumption made possible the positioning of women as primary consumers for the domestic sphere and provided the impetus for shopper stereotypes designed to influence public perception and, thus, buying behavior. These early raced stereotypes, which continue to pervade popular portrayals of White women, set the foundation for the controlling images (Collins, 2000) that construct the consumer identities of Black women and justify racist, sexist and classist oppression. In order to call into question these controlling images of women as consumers and advance here a critical

pedagogy of consumption, we have examined popular cultural texts as articulations in which consumers of popular media engage to construct 'particular positions of identification and knowledge' (Hall, 2000: 272). To change the ways in which these articulations inform our actions and practices we offer this analysis as a starting point for recognizing the contexts in which we understand and can begin to challenge social practices informed by consumerism.

By problematizing the ways these supposed common sense dominant discourses construct reality and help shape the ways in which people are perceived and treated in society, we can begin the process of rearticulating the messages of consumerism in more socially just ways. Clearly, the racist, classist and sexist perspectives that have pervaded consumer ideology since the rise of the mass-market economy continue to characterize contemporary popular discourse. Popular cultural artifacts, including magazine advertisements, television commercials, Internet forums, music lyrics and other forms of media reflect these majoritarian stories that position female consumers differently based on race and class. Black female consumers, poor Black women in particular, are subject to rage and disgust, drawn from the racist, sexist and classist assumptions about their consumptive behaviors. This degrading and overwhelmingly negative portrayal is starkly different from the gendered consumer roles typically assigned to White, middle-class women, including the popular culture constructions we have examined here. The enduring prevalence of these stereotypes poses a marked contradiction to the demise of the gendered shopper and the rise of rational and savvy consumers referenced by Bowlby (2001).

While persistent, pervasive, and widely accepted, the reality constructed by the controlling images we have examined here is neither permanent nor irreplaceable. Like DeLuca (1999), drawing from Stuart Hall's (1986) and Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) discussions of articulation, we posit that reality and its meanings are not permanently fixed; rather, meanings are discursively created and are constantly in flux, as reality is an arena of contestation for particular ways of constructing how we see world. As DeLuca explains, 'The linking of elements into a temporary unity is not necessary, but rather is contingent and particular and is the result of a political and historical struggle' (1999: 335). The meanings of these controlling images have been politically and historically articulated in certain ways and can thus be rearticulated in new ways.

Acknowledging the ways in which controlling images of women as consumers in popular culture might inform our perceptions, actions and practices is the first step toward disarticulating these insidious discourses and rearticulating them in more empowering and agentic ways. DeLuca (1999) posits that these rearticulations can come about as a result of what he calls antagonisms that reveal the limits of certain articulated discourses. We offer this analysis of sexist, racist and classist portrayals of women as just such an act of resistance, an overt challenge to dominant discourses of White, middle-class privilege. Following DeLuca, we present this challenge as an antagonism that 'occurs at the point of the relation of the discourse to the surrounding life world and shows the impossibility of the discourse constituting a permanently closed or sutured totality. It shows the linkage of elements to be

contingent, not necessary' (1999: 336). Through this research, we hope to foster a critical approach to the consuming pedagogies of popular media and offer a call for new stories to be told about women as consumers as well as for new meanings to be attached to the discourses of these consumers. These rearticulated discourses might acknowledge the social, political and economic structures that perpetuate domestic poverty and offer a more realistic portrayal of the choices, needs and concerns faced by all women. We can also advance such a rearticulation by fostering conversations in which teachers and learners engage with the public in exploring our own attitudes about consumption and gender and in reflecting on how these attitudes are not natural but are, rather, produced and negotiated. Finally, we can further advance a critical pedagogy of consumption by exposing and critiquing the kinds of discourses we have discussed in this article and encouraging women to offer their own acts of antagonism – to talk back to those dominant and repressive discourses – by writing and speaking their own consumption stories.

Notes

1. We use the term Black here rather than African American because the ethnic heritage of the women portrayed in the largely visual discourses we examined, while often assumed to be African American, is in most cases unknown to us as viewers. Therefore, we do not presume to know the heritage of every Black woman depicted in these media, but recognize the ways that these discourses are often interpreted as applying primarily to African Americans.
2. While a wide range of people use welfare, dominant discourses in the USA often perpetuate the idea that welfare is the purview of women of color, and often of African American women. Hadjor (1995) states that politicians 'can be heard expounding upon the problem posed by 'welfare queens' in the ghettos. The language some of them use conjures up images of indulgence and pampering, of Black 'queens' living off welfare checks (and probably off crack cocaine too), surrounded by illegitimate offspring who will grow up to take their place in the ghetto cycle of dependency and criminality – or perhaps to take the job of a better-qualified White by exploiting the affirmative-action and quota programs sponsored by the interfering liberals' (1995: 74).
3. We recognize that the people making these statements do not specifically state that the women they are deriding are Black. While we cannot assume the race of the targets of their derision, we argue that these stereotypes are similar to those constructions of Black women seen in the historical and political discourses of the myth of the Black welfare queen (Hadjor, 1995).
4. While West's lyrics do not specifically reference race, we base the assumption that he and the other Black male artists we examine are directing these sentiments toward Black women on the visual evidence provided in the music videos and the cultural patterns described by Rose (2008).

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